

THE KANSAS IDEAL.

IS IT EMBODIED IN MR. WHITE'S TYPICAL TOWN, OR IS IT TO BE WORKED OUT?

It is a good thing to know people as they are. If we have to discuss problems with them. Misconception of motives and habits of life is more fatal to harmonious solution than any difference of interests or divergence of aims. The passions aroused in the last campaign, so far as they were honest, popular passions, and not the simulations of the demagogue used for dramatic effect upon others, sprang on both sides less from earnest conviction—though there was doubtless a depth of earnestness in each party—than from suspicion based on ignorance of the conditions of the peoples who were the typical believers in the different doctrines. The Westerner really was deluded into the belief that the Easterner wanted to oppress him in mere selfishness, and could not realize the complex life which saw in his notions a menace not simply to his selfish interests, but to his laboriously developed civilization. So the Eastern man, knowing the West largely from its most erratic and violent spokesmen, found it difficult to believe in the good sense or good faith of communities which accepted such teachers. No part of the West has suffered so much in this respect as Kansas. Therefore, it is a matter of peculiar interest that so keen an observer of its life and so straightforward a critic of its tendencies as Mr. William Allen White should have written of "A Typical Kansas Community," for the current number of "The Atlantic Monthly."

If Matthew Arnold were now writing "A Word About America" he would certainly study Mr. White's description to see if it would aid him in finding that "manner of life belonging to the highest civilization" which his Boston critic assured him existed in towns never heard of by Mr. Arnold. The political aspect of Kansas is entirely aside from Mr. White's purpose. It is suggested only by the fact that political misunderstanding has made emphasis the need of social insight. His aim has been to reveal the workings of the Kansas town, the social life of its people and their industrial state so far as it conditions the family and village life. The present era in Kansas, he says, is one of home-making. The gambler has gone. The day of gaining fortunes by passing lands from one to another at fictitious values is gone. The speculator finds his market unresponsive. The people now in the State are no longer camping; they intend to remain, and accordingly are making homes and setting social boundaries.

A State in which the largest town has hardly forty thousand inhabitants, dotted with country seats which are in the strictest sense country towns, drawing their sustenance from the farming community round about, and having no factories and no labor problem, can scarcely be called cosmopolitan, though all the nations of the earth be represented there. Existence in Kansas is essentially simple, not to say primitive. The appliances of civilization may be all there. Books, papers, railroads and electricity may be at everybody's hand, but these are only tools and do not mean either finish or complexity in the social fabric. Mr. White thus describes the outward aspect of his typical town:

"The highways are as straight as the surveyor's chain could make them. Set back at regular distances from the sidewalk are the more pretentious residences, built in the obtrusive architectural style of the 'boom' days, complacent in their sham magnificence. The paint has been washed off many of them, and their faded appearance is almost tragic. The story of these unimproved houses is written upon the town, and in the leafless season it depresses the passing stranger; but in the early spring, when the grass comes, nature covers up the barren aspect. The smaller houses of the village are less depressing. Perhaps they do not cover such bitter disappointments. They are like modest cottages of the world over."

There is in these towns an intense social democracy, such as Mr. White thinks does not exist in older American States, though his account with minor variations might fit many small towns even in New-York. Class lines are indistinct. There are upper and lower crusts, but there is no "dead line." Society is graded something after this fashion: "The old white crowd," the "young white crowd," the "literary crowd," the "young dancing crowd," the "church social crowd," or "lodge crowd," and the "surprise party crowd." Those terms define themselves and the social and intellectual status of those who include pretty clearly. The family does not belong to a "crowd" as a unit. One daughter attends the lodge socials and joins in spelling matches. Another borrows herself listening to the pretentious learning of the Browning Circle. A son crosses the railroad track to a noisy dance on a kitchen floor, while the parents attend the meetings of the Bon Ton Whist Club and play for gilt-edged copies of "Ben Hur" and "hand-painted" smoking sets. The old style camp-meetings and revivals hold sway with the people who live in the side streets, and are regarded with indulgent superiority by the members of more fashionable churches.

Tenement-houses are unknown in Kansas. Wages are not high, but opportunities for saving are many. The banker is generally a retired farmer, or storekeeper, or successful real estate man. The lawyer and the doctor are people of importance. The former is put in office to help him pay his debts, and the latter to pay everybody's debt to him. The community is highly moral. In spite of all the fun about women in politics, Mr. White declares their influence good. They take little part in other than local questions, their office-holding has generally been a joke; but their silent influence has been uplifting. "In most towns in other States," writes Mr. White, "the corners of the principal streets are occupied by drunks. In the town where this paper is written the influence of women has been exerted so forcibly that three of the four corners where the two main streets cross are occupied by banks. Instead of Hogan's retreat on the fourth corner stands a bookstore. There the boys and the young men of the town find a meeting place. . . . It is a town of eight thousand inhabitants, without a saloon, without a strange woman, without a town drunkard."

These towns have libraries, and the politicians do not cut down their allowance. E. P. Roe is still the favorite author. The worst theatrical companies possible and "terrible" concerts are the joy of the people. "When Kansas goes to the theatre," declares Mr. White, "it drops back into the dark ages." Nevertheless, he says: "In every Kansas town there is a group of men and women who read the best books, and who go regularly to Chicago or St. Louis every year to hear the best music."

Such in brief is the "Kansas town of Mr. White's description. How exactly does that "group of people who read the best books" correspond to the "group of people of good taste, good manners, good education, and of self-respect," who were "interested in worldly themes" and met each other with that "mutual courtesy and that self-respect which belong to men and women who are sure of their footing," tales of whom so stimulated Mr. Arnold's interest.

The same question which met Mr. Arnold must meet anybody who attempts to judge the character and influence of this Kansas civilization. How numerous is this body and how popular are its aims. It is difficult for one man to judge who relies for information on the prevailing Kansas habit of abusing everything that is not Eastern or European; gentleman would call good manners in society, cultivated standards in literature or conservatism in politics.

We have had crudely held up to us so persistently as a standard that we are inclined to consider these readers of the best books and interpreters of the best music as lonesome exiles in Kansas, and perhaps most unjustly. They probably form a small and influential part of the community there as elsewhere, though to judge from Mr. White's description their surroundings are depressing and narrowing.

But more important than the question of the number of the enlightened is that of the openness of the rank and file to influence. Mr. White's town of pretentiously shabby houses, simple, democratic society and good morals exhibits exactly what Mr. Arnold called "middle-class virtues," meaning by that term no approbrium, but using it merely to describe a one-sided existence which he thought characteristic of the English middle class and of the great body of Americans. These Kansas people have conduct, which is, after all, the greatest thing in life; they have equality; they have simplicity; they have mobility. These are great advantages if they are accepted for what they are and made the groundwork for subsequently rounded life. But such a society is lacking in distinction and real sense of beauty. It is not interesting. It has not solved the human problem. Not that it is to blame for that or that it is peculiar in that imperfection. It is the characteristic of all narrow society isolated from the great world. And the complex organization of that great world likewise has its defects. What is wanted is an understanding by each of its own defects and a striving for the other's excellencies. How much better London or Paris or New-York would be if their conventions merely conserved virtues and never protected vices. On the other hand, how much more worth living would life be in Kansas if rudeness were not glorified as self-respect and the shortcomings incident to new settlements from the great world.

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